

## BAPTIZE EVERYBODY?

Matthew 28:16-20

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I've always wondered what it's like to be on the receiving end of Christian evangelism, particularly the more combative type: to be told, in essence, that the deity in whom one believes, to whom one has been praying, from whom one has received comfort, sustenance and meaning, doesn't exist; to be informed, further, that the religious rituals which have given order and symmetry to life are superstitious, pagan ceremonies; and - further - that, the end result of it all will be an eternity suffering torment in a fiery hell. I have learned that to tell someone that his/her deep beliefs and highest hopes are utterly wrong is not ordinarily a very good way to begin a conversation or enhance dialogue. It is, rather, to put the other on the defensive; to call out beligerence, argument. I have learned, further, that if my purpose is to share my truth, the best way to do that is to relate somehow to the truth the other person possesses: somehow to convey respect for the other, to listen, to engage in dialogue; to understand that the truth is always mediated through my own very human perceptions. I live on the basis of the maxim - that one should be wary of folk who know the whole truth about anything: political parties, music, religion or the best ever baseball team to take the field.

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I have concluded that to be on the receiving end of some Christian evangelism is to be put down, to be relegated to the status of spiritual imbecility or, at best, immaturity. And I further conclude, that the evangelistic zeal to turn everyone into Christians just like us, seriously diminishes the God around whom the entire enterprise revolves. In fact, it seems that God appears to be an image of the people doing the most zealous evangelizing.

The theologians have always known that the God about whom human beings dare to talk is a God experienced, perceived, and discussed in very limited human terms. Your God Is Too Small, J. B. Phillips said in a book title. That's always the case. My perceptions, my intellect, my emotions are human: my God (my belief in God) is limited at least by my own humanity. Thus Luther could talk about "the Hidden God" who exists beyond all human religious systems. And in our day that intriguing concept was echoed by Paul Tillich under the guise of "the God beyond theism." The theologians know that, and in our clearer moments we know it too. But it is not universally an important idea. The God of religion can be rather provincial and is pretty small. South African churches seriously propose that Apartheid is in the Divine Order of things - in the same way that German Christians somehow made peace with an Aryan god who had turned his back so thoroughly on his Semitic children that they could simply be eliminated. It sounds to me sometimes like God is a Baptist, or a Brethren, or a Roman Catholic - and that God's agenda for all creation is simply to get everybody believing the same doctrines and singing out of the same hymnbook.

The issue has been around a long time. The Deuteronomy text this morning contained the theological assertion of monotheism - "there is no other." That's the radical word which came to Israel - there is one God: Jahweh is God's name. There are two ways to interpret that, however, and there is a constant intermural struggle in Israel between those who see God's oneness in universal terms - i.e. God is Lord of the Babylonians too - only they use a different vocabulary; and those who see God's oneness very narrowly, as our private secret, our God is the real

God, yours is just a fake. When Jonah gets called to go to Nineveh, the crisis is not so much the voyage and big fish as it is Jonah's absolute certainty that the Ninevites are utterly lost and wrong and besides that, they don't matter. That God loves Ninevites is a shattering thought to Jonah...

At their better moments God's people, in the Old Testament, know that they are chosen - not to be God's only children or to enjoy privileged status as God's indulged children, but to live as God's people in the world: to be servants, to be a light to the whole world - to show the world what God means by human life. The tension, however, is relentless between that universalist position and the inevitable religious exclusiveness which sounds like a game of "mine is better than yours" played on the stage of history.

It is there in the life of Jesus. It surfaces everytime he bumps into and challenges the constricting exclusivism of religion. When Jesus breaks bread with sinners, associates with tax collectors, and talks to a Samaritan woman in public - he is shattering the religious exclusivism of his day and challenging ours.

It was perhaps the toughest issue facing the early Christian church. At precisely the time Matthew wrote his Gospel, the early church was asking itself whether God cared enough about Gentiles for them to bother telling the story of Jesus in Gentile cities. Or should they, Jewish Christians, simply stay put, enjoy this new truth, and look down their noses at the rest of the world?

Thus the Gospel of Matthew ends with the Risen Christ on a mountain with his followers: a mountain like the one on which Moses negotiated the original covenant, Matthew wants us to understand. It is the setting for the great Missing Commission. Go - to all the world baptizing, making disciples. The radical word is "all nations." The first and intended impact of the words of our Lord, I submit - was to break open the exclusivism of religion; to shatter the tempting, comfortable theology of God who cares mainly about me and people like me. Clearly the emphasis here is on the word "all." The intent of Jesus is to broaden the focus of the early church to encompass the whole world. That was, and is, a radical word.

And so, into the world his followers have gone: compelled by the power of this great commission. We have gone more faithfully when we have heard the emphasis on "all nations" and know, in that God's great love for the entire world. Not long after Jesus said the word - the Roman Empire became Christian - by fiat. Even more fascinating are those bursts of missionary activity down through history, almost mystical to me when I reflect on them. The allure of the Island of Iona, off the West coast of Scotland, is partly that. For hundreds of years Irish monks lived there and then sailed off to Great Britain and to the continent - telling the story of Jesus. Or the Jesuits in the Far East, sometimes following, sometimes leading the trading companies. Or the thousands upon thousands of men and women who responded to the commission by going from America and Northern Europe, to China, Japan, Africa, in the 19th and 20th centuries. Or today, the Christians from Columbus who practice medicine in Zaire, or work for peace in Northern Ireland: the teachers, engineers, pastors, nurses and farmers - who go, still today, into all the world - in the name of Jesus Christ.

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The old issue remains, however. It is raised for us by the text. It is the matter of religious exclusiveness: the temptation to portray our news as the only news. Reinhold Niebuhr once taught that human sin was best illustrated by the simple fact that every philosophy known to us, sooner or later, concludes that it is the only philosophy. Niebuhr warned that religious pride was the worst kind of pride.

see Hutter

Historian Martin Marty believes that we live in a time that appeals to the universal human need for exclusivism and the certainty that "I am right" which accompanies it. In a recent book he notes the world-wide "resurgent fundamentalism of the kind that has gained political power in Shiite Islamic Iran...and is behind a powerful Opus Dei movement within the Roman Church, and which surfaces among beligerent American Protestants promoting Christian Yellow Pages." (By Way of Response, p. 89)

In a world full of ambiguity, theological certainty has enormous appeal. But we also live in a world that is growing smaller and which must learn to deal with its own diversity and pluralism. A fascinating theological perspective is added by controversial thinkers like John Hick who argues that the same God is at the center of all religion, and African scholar John Mbiti, who wrote very poignantly in a recent essay, "God must have been active among African people as he was among the Jewish people - was he not there in other times and in such places as Mount Fugi and Mt. Kenya as well as Mt. Sinai." Mbiti notes the incredible recent growth of the Christian Church in Africa. In 1900 there were 9 million Christians in Africa - 7% of the population. In 1980 there were 200 million - 45% of the population. He writes, "The God described in the Bible is none other than the God who is already known in the framework of traditional African religiosity. The missionaries who introduced the Gospel to Africa in the past 200 years did not bring God to our continent. Instead, God brought them. They proclaimed the name of Jesus Christ. But they used the names of the God who was and is already known by African people." (Theologians in Transition, p. 54/55, "The Encounter of Christian Faith and African Religion").

Is the point of it all to get everybody singing out of the same hymnbook? Believing the same doctrines? Using the same vocabulary? Living by the same rules? Does going into the world, baptizing and making disciples mean turning the whole world into one big Southern Baptist Revival, or Roman Catholic parish, or dour Scottish Kirk? History would seem to argue against that. Even if God is a Baptist, or Roman Catholic, or Presbyterian, getting people to affirm the same doctrines, or be baptized under the same rubrics has not always produced more peace or happiness or sanity in God's world. Christians have killed one another in many wars proving the point. And we're still at it. "Making Christians," as an isolated imperative I would submit, is not the point. In fact, I am moved by Martin Marty's integrity when he writes: "Never again approaches to mission that make God into a predator - dependent on my ability to pounce on others...Never can I make proselytism the focus of my relation to others." (op. cit, p. III).

The alternative word which came to the writers of the New Testament, particularly Paul, is that God's fundamental purpose in creating, and in becoming incarnate is to heal, make whole, reconcile the whole creation, enhance its life, nurture its peace and forever love its children so that they will enjoy life and live it fully.

I find compelling power there and an impulse to theological integrity - maybe even some theological bravery.

*Williams*  
Jesus Christ sent his disciples into the world - sends us, who would be his disciples into the world - with the burden of God's love for the whole world on our hearts. Our task and privilege is not to convince everybody to become Presbyterian, but to tell the story of God's love: to bear witness to the liberating truth of God's love that we have discovered. To baptize, first of all, whatever culture we are living in, with the spirit of the Christ who sent us. The mission of evangelism, in 20th century terms, I believe, is to be the church of Jesus Christ with all the integrity and love we can muster: to witness to the truth of the Gospel by the quality of life we live as the church, not to devote all our energies to persuading others that they are now wrong and we all right and that they will be eternally safe if they simply cross over to our side.

Evangelism, (the word is almost offensive because of its exclusive connotations), I propose is to baptize this culture here and now with the gentleness and justice of Jesus: to baptize the hurting people around us with a love that values each one; to baptize our neighbors with respect for them as persons. Evangelism, I believe, more than ever, does not mean slicker devices to persuade the customer to choose our product; it means to be the church, to witness to the Lordship of Jesus Christ by the way we are the church in this place. People are convinced, I believe, not when they receive convincing argument and effective marketing, but when they see it: when in the name of Christ the cold are sheltered, the hungry fed, the oppressed set free, the lonely loved, and the story told. Make disciples of all nations, baptizing them.

I suggest that the commission is an invitation to be the church with integrity and great love, and to believe boldly, bravely, that God really does love our whole world, that with God all things are possible, that our job as disciples is not to be responsible for production quotas, making Christians, but to bear witness to the truth of Jesus Christ, trusting that the activity of God's spirit in the world will do the persuading and that God, not the preacher, not even the church, is in charge of conversions.

It is, I believe, an invitation to believe radically that God's eternal love extends even to those who don't know about Jesus, or who do know and choose not to believe: that we are not responsible for saving folk from or for anything; that we finally and profoundly are called to experience and enjoy and to tell the story of a love so big it includes all nations, all people, even us. It is an invitation to let go of all exclusivism and to believe boldly, bravely, that all things - even human history - are in God's hands; that in God's time, and by God's grace, and through God's love, there will be a day when "Jesus shall reign wherever the sun - its successive journeys run." Amen.